

**Opening Statement by Congressman Tom McClintock
Ranking Member, House Natural Resources Committee, Sub-Committee
on Water, Oceans and Wildlife
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While California's watersheds are going up in smoke due to years of bad forest management, this sub-committee holds a virtual hearing on perpetuating a historic accident – the Salton Sea.

So as our watersheds burn, let's talk about the Salton Sea. It's not really a sea – it's a sink created by an engineering accident in 1905. Although the lakebed has held water in past millennia – climate change eliminated it around the 16th Century during a period called “the Little Ice Age.” This shouldn't surprise us. Up until about 5,000 years ago, some of the largest fresh-water lakes in the world could be found in what is now the Sahara Desert. The diluvian rains that formed these lakes coincided with the Holocene Climatic Optimum -- from 9,000 to 5,000 BC, when global temperatures were much warmer than they are today. Must have been all those Fred Flintstone cars. But we'll save that climate change discussion for another day.

It was not nature, but rather a man-made engineering accident, that sent water from the Colorado River into this dry lake bed for 18 months before it could be corrected.

Ever since then, this colossal environmental mistake has been perpetuated by using surplus Colorado River water. As that surplus is claimed for other purposes, water flow to the Salton Sea has decreased and the accidental lake continues to obey nature's preference that it dry up.

The question now is what to do?

The state of California seems committed to continue to pour millions of dollars and billions of gallons of fresh water into the Salton Sink. In 2003, Governor Gray Davis signed the “Salton Sea Restoration Act,” over my objections in the State Senate, I might add. It acknowledged the loss of water entitlements and obligated the Imperial Irrigation District to provide 15 years of mitigation flows while the state “studied” the problem. That was 18 years and \$700 million ago. And nothing has happened.

But that's California's problem. That reality was acknowledged in the 2003 Act and reiterated in 2016, when California and the Department of the Interior entered into a Memorandum of Understanding affirming that the state has the lead role in Salton Sea management efforts.

While the Salton Sea is NOT a federal responsibility – maintaining our federal forests is. And imagine the good we could do for our forests and watersheds if we could change the laws that are preventing active forest management. We could be doing that today if the majority wanted to. We passed many such bills in previous sessions, but not this one.

It is true the Bureau of Reclamation and Army Corps own much of the lake bed, but that is only an issue because of California's failure to fulfill its promises, which brings us back again to the question of what to do.

It seems to me there are two ways to address this issue. One is to continue to spend enormous sums of money to maintaining a salt lake where nature doesn't want one. That's money much better spent on watershed and forest management and water development. The other is to recognize that there are much higher priorities that take precedent – including providing fresh water for people. Perpetuating an engineering accident that the federal government had nothing to do with is certainly not a high federal priority.

True, it would mean more dust kicking up from the dry lake bed – but that's true of any dry lake bed. And although cloth masks are useless in stopping aerosolized viral particles – one study compared it to trying to stop mosquitoes with a chain link fence – they are VERY effective at stopping dust particles and they are already required apparel for the radical chic of California. True, it would mean lost habitat to the non-native species that still inhabit the dying lake – but a fish hatchery in more viable habitats could easily compensate. And as we have seen in Northern California, thriving agriculture can provide plenty of refuge for migrating fowl.

It is the responsibility of California to decide what it wants to do with this mistake and DO IT. It is the responsibility of the federal government to change the laws that make active forest management, watershed protection and water storage cost prohibitive. At the moment, neither the state nor the federal government is meeting its responsibility.

